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The Erotics of Mentorship

The best teaching is always intimate. Today's universities make it difficult to talk about that.

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"Why would anyone want to date their teacher?" a friend said wonderingly. It took a moment to realize that, to her, this was a rhetorical question.

"You mean you've never had a crush on one of yours?" She looked back in bewilderment.

"God, no!" she certainly had not, and seemed scandalized, as if she had been told an obscene secret.

Thoughtfully addressing the erotic dimension of mentorship is difficult in today's universities, whose governance is shaped by risk management and simplistic codes of conduct.

Over the past few months, as new revelations about sexual harassment hit the news almost daily, furious debates over what constitutes appropriate behavior in professional relationships have erupted across the world. People of all generations are debating whether office romances are still allowed and if there are universal or biological instincts that govern sexuality and sexual interactions. But there are perhaps no places more vulnerable to the intertwining of work and romance than colleges and universities. Indeed, a defining characteristic of university life is the entanglement of stimulating ideas and charismatic people. The embarrassing undergraduate crush on a professor, teaching assistant, or even an advanced peer is common enough to be the stuff of comedy.

Probably for as long as there have been students and teachers, students have often felt a visceral thrill in their stomachs when fired up by a new passion that also happens to be exemplified by a powerful teacher. However, in recent decades it has become taboo to discuss the erotic dimension of mentorship.

Nonetheless it has a very long history of being both celebrated and thoughtfully

interrogated. In perhaps the earliest written example, the *Alcibiades I*, Socrates adopts the guise of a lover to divert his student, the young Alcibiades, from going into an unfulfilling political career. Socrates claims to exercise over his student-lover an absolute power that the latter should willingly accept. "All these designs of yours," says Socrates,

> cannot be accomplished by you without my help; so great is the power which I believe myself to have over you and your concerns. . . . For, as you hope to prove your own great value to the state, and having proved it, to attain at once to absolute power, so do I indulge a hope that I shall be the supreme power over you, if I am able to prove my own great value to you, and to show you that neither guardian, nor kinsman, nor any one is able to deliver into your hands the power which you desire, but I only.

Plato reprises similar themes in the *Symposium*, where Socrates teaches Alcibiades not just about himself, but about love in general, by at once stoking and refusing the latter's sexual longings.

Far from disappearing with the homoerotic conventions of ancient Greece, this trope of a mutually beneficial, erotic but also intellectualized student-teacher romance becomes something of a genre in Western philosophical writing. In twelfth-century France, the prominent logician and theologian Abelard and his pupil Heloise famously struggle, in a series of letters, to determine whether the bond between them is intellectual or romantic. "Your reputation," Heloise writes to Abelard,

> which so much attracts the vanity of our sex, your air, your manner, that light in your eyes which expresses the vivacity of your mind, your conversation so easy and elegant that it gave everything you said an agreeable turn; in short, everything spoke for you! Very different from those mere scholars who with all their learning have not the capacity to keep up an ordinary conversation, and who with all their wit cannot win a

> woman who has much less share of brains than themselves.

Fast forward to eighteenth-century France, where Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes an 800-page novel, *La Nouvelle Heloise*, that reprises and updates this question for Enlightenment Europe. "What calm in all my senses! What pure, continuous, universal voluptuousness!" writes Rousseau's latter-day Abelard, Saint-Preux, as he tries to convince himself that his love for his student, Julie, has been successfully sublimated into a purely intellectual union of minds.

Between these two Heloises, Michel de Montaigne writes to, and of, his friend and intellectual interlocutor Etienne de la Boetie, in ways that have continued to baffle his biographers. "If a man should importune me to give a reason why I loved him," culminates one of Montaigne's essays, "I find it could not otherwise be expressed, than by making answer: because it was he, because it was I."

It is not hard to extend this list further. Consider Ada Lovelace's relationship to the tutor with whom she almost eloped in her teenage years, and then to her fellow computing pioneer Charles Babbage, or the bond between Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, which frequently involved exchanging not just essay drafts but also undergraduate lovers ("One single aim fired us," Beauvoir went on to write in *The Prime of Life*, "the urge to embrace all experience, and to bear witness concerning it"). Consider also Martin Heidegger's love affair with the young Hannah Arendt, whose acumen went on to match and perhaps even surpass—even while constantly, deeply engaging—that of her dissertation advisor, and for which reason Arendt experienced Heidegger's collaboration with the Third Reich as a personal betrayal.

Consider, even, the self-conscious intensity with which Teju Cole receives praise from V. S. Naipaul:

> "He's very good. He speaks so well, he speaks well." And, turning back to me, "You speak very well." In any other context, it would have felt like faint praise. But we'd drunk claret, we were laughing along to long-dead

> Twain, and I had managed to surprise the wily old master.

Yet even with such literary and philosophical bona fides, acknowledging the erotic force of pedagogical situations remains difficult, perhaps never more so than in the present-day U.S. university, whose governance is shaped by corporatized risk management and simplistic codes of conduct. This is only made more complicated by the infusion of the very serious concerns raised by #MeToo.

And yet: intellectual magnetism, a notoriously protean force, often shades into erotic attraction. Such attachments are not reducible to, though they can be troublingly compatible with, predatory sexual behavior. At their best and most benign, they bring out our best selves—the potentially heroic dimension of Eros chronicled by Plato—driving us to develop nascent potentials into noteworthy accomplishments. That is what Alcibiades claims Socrates helps him achieve; and it is how Abelard and Heloise, and then Rousseau's Julie and Saint-Preux, justify their ongoing correspondence.

Such experiences are like a hall of mirrors, teeming with competing projections: confusions about whether one wants to *be with* the other person or merely *be* them, whether this other person is desirable for their unique presence or for the hope that their connoisseurship and expertise can somehow be transposed into one's own body and mind.

For the faint-hearted, one escape from these confusions is offered by Sigmund Freud's theory of sublimation. For Freud, sublimation is an escape valve by means of which humans transform their unachievable or illicit (usually sexual) desires into abstract aesthetic or intellectual ones. As he puts it in *Civilization and its Discontents*:

> Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development. It is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life. If one were to yield to a first impression, one would say that

> sublimation is a vicissitude which has been forced upon the instincts entirely by civilization. But it would be wiser to reflect upon this a little longer. . . . it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means) of powerful instincts.

In this narrative, any great passion necessarily has an initial sexual dimension—but great achievement is measured by the extent that this sexual dimension is overcome. As Freud describes, for instance, Leonardo da Vinci's turn from his illicit love of his father to a socially acceptable love of beautiful art, he sees such intellectualized bonds as therapeutic for the individual whose thoughts and feelings they liberate. They are, moreover, beneficial for society, which is enriched by the expression of their relentless sublimated intensity. Through the suppression of bodily desires, intellectual and artistic activity is born, and everyone wins.

Prudishness is counterproductive, veiling the subject in silence and thus making it harder to protect young people from being exploited.

Freud's account is comforting to those of us who want to believe that the cerebral and the hormonal aspects of our bodies exist in separation from each other, so that any contact between them necessarily involves a metaphoric jump across two states of matter. It also echoes the penultimate movement of Plato's *Symposium*, in which Socrates promises to the lover of beautiful men a gradual philosophical ascent into a love of beautiful environments, and then of the abstract concept of beauty itself.

But in Plato's dialogue, this placating speech is interrupted by the intrusion of Socrates's un-sublimated, bawdily drunk lover, who brings the philosophers' discussion back into the gutter of bodily urges. And indeed, when examined with a Socratically ironic eye, Freud's theory of sublimation itself seems as repressed as

the drives it claims to reveal. First, it is too cynical about the possibility of the intellectual life being attractive in its own right—that, for instance, Beauvoir could reasonably leave a more conventionally handsome lover to be the lifelong partner of the distinctly homely, but philosophically scintillating, Sartre. Second, it denies the genuine confusions of which figures such as Abelard and Heloise speak so eloquently, and which have to do with their difficulty in keeping our cerebral and our bodily urges apart from each other. The genre of ecstatic but also agonized self-scrutiny to which their letters belong testifies to the great difficulty of maintaining firm boundaries between desires that are sublimated and un-sublimated. Indeed, the overwhelming whole-body nature of these experiences is where their intellectually as well as emotionally transformative potential seems to come from.

How can we speak with integrity and nuance of such intangible and complex emotional and intellectual engagements and acknowledge their impact?

In our collective discomfort with relationships that press against the limits of moral and social norms, it can be awkward even to entertain the possibility that they can offer social goods and personal gains. Such prudishness is counterproductive, veiling the subject in silence and thus making it harder to achieve the desired end of protecting young people from being exploited, emotionally or physically, by the more knowing and experienced. It is important to acknowledge that such vulnerabilities remain one of the most important reasons why bonds of mentorship require special sensitivity, attentiveness, and care, both from the parties involved and from surrounding communities.

Intellectual magnetism often shades into erotic attraction. Such attachments are not reducible to predatory behavior and, at their best, bring out our best selves.

But it is also necessary to admit why, despite such vulnerabilities, people continue to be drawn into them, and why so many of us look back on our charismatic teachers as beacons. After all, electric teaching, the kind that leaves an indelible mark, happens in the flesh, in the moment, in the live performance of bodies sharing the energy of a time and place. (There is a reason why, for all their utility, online learning programs do not advertise groundbreaking teachers or the language of personal transformation.)

We both think often of these difficulties as we struggle to mentor and support our students at Yale. As young faculty members, we remain uncomfortably aware of having sought out meetings in hallways and over drinks after inspiring lectures in which the excitement of the conversation was clearly tinged with something more—a shiver of heightened awareness, intensity, and passion that was both intellectual and sexual, perhaps sexual because intellectual. We did not necessarily want the former, but we were also unwilling to lose the latter. Clear solutions, sharp rules, or a tidy legalistic pathway through the murky terrain of misconduct via institutional channels seem to us like a pipe dream—though that aspiration can be a powerful vector for change.

The ambivalence we feel has historical precedent. Besides the *Alcibiades I* and the *Symposium*, many other works explore how such relationships, when based in mutual respect and self-respect, can be honorable and socially beneficial—or, when they are not, can veer into abuse and self-abasement. In the sixteenth century, even as the Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto satirizes the erotic dimensions of teacher-student relationships through the stereotype of the sodomitic pedant, he also acknowledges the sociocultural transformations wrought by the new humanist teachers, who galvanized new kinds of social mobility through intellectual aspiration and training. The gradual inclusion of women into the humanist project of universal education triggered a new conjunction of intellectual and erotic energies that now seems utterly normative, but which was transgressive and titillating for centuries. Debates over coeducation remind us that the coupling of intellectual and erotic opportunities have seemed socially threatening not only because of prudery, but also because of the subversive charge they carry: such

relationships cut across traditional gender roles and open up new spaces for alternative forms of social bonding and emotional expression. Pedagogical Eros catalyzes both intellectual and social transformations.

Is such an attitude toward your teacher dangerous, especially if this teacher intends to instrumentalize it? Of course it is. But does that mean we can, and should, try to live in a world in which such feelings are not allowed to develop? To some, the answer is an unequivocal yes—a moral extension of zero-tolerance policies that seems obvious because of the inevitable dangers of abuse and exploitation. But such a sharp-edged stance refuses to confront the rich complexity of interpersonal relations. It also insists on a social policing of sexual desires that echoes the puritanism of other eras and its attendant victim-blaming.

Attempts to eradicate any trace of the erotic because of its possible perils refuse, on the one hand, to admit the potentially sexual grounds of some of our most abstract passions; and, on the other, to concede that a person can feel deeply recognized within, and satisfied by, a bond in which ideas take center stage. In our current rush to respond to sexual harassment claims with effective actions, we may be engaging in what Masha Gessen recently described as a moral panic: an attempt to foreclose and deny, along with nonconsensual acts that rightly deserve condemnation, a variety of queerer sexual relations that only seem unacceptable from a position of quite conservative sexual normativity.

The question should not be how to exorcize even the hint of erotic ambiguity from the academic workplace, but rather how to allow our classrooms to remain safe spaces amid such ambiguities; how to support a student's as yet fluid, and often unselfconscious, identifications and projections without causing these explorations to be manipulated and exploited, or shamed. In order to do so, we need to recognize and condemn sexual harassment in an academic context—and also to acknowledge that, even at our most metaphysical, both we and our students are embodied beings.

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